Private and Public Religion
Matthew 61:6, 16-21
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How to live like a Christian in the secular city? How to be intentionally and specifically Chrstian in a world which, on the subject of public religion is particularly ambiguous? What does religious behavior look like?

The question, which seems fairly parochial at first, has been much in the news recently. Pope John Paul II was on the cover of Time several weeks ago - the feature article was on Discord in the Church, and it well could have been written about the entire ecumenical, Christian family. Across the breadth of the whole church there is a widening diversity between those who believe that devotion to Jesus means political activism, such as harboring Central American refugees, or participating in military revolution - and those who, for the same devotion to Jesus, regard appropriate religious behavior in terms of traditional piety: prayer, penance, going to Mass or worship, reading the Bible.

Ordinarily, the topic is discussed in terms of whether the job of a Christian is to make converts, or to change society. But there is another way to discuss the issue: it may be more meaningful because it is more personal. It is suggested by the text this morning...private religion, or public religion.

What does a religious act look like? It is difficult to resist one of my favorite apocryphal stories at this point, so I won't. An airliner, at cruise altitude, lost one engine. The pilot's voice on the intercom explained the predicament. One of the passengers said in a loud voice: "Quick, somebody do something religious." And so the Baptists on board started to pray, and the Methodists sang their favorite hymn, the Catholic passengers reached for their rosaries, and the Presbyterians took up an offering.

The time was, of course, that within the Christian family, the Roman Catholics could be counted on to know what religious behavior looked like. I knew from watching the Shaughnessy children two houses away that it meant confession on Thursday, cheese sandwiches on Friday, Mass on Sunday, and crossing yourself at the free-throw line. From the Baptist friends beside us I learned that it meant carrying the Bible to church a lot, twice on Sunday, prayer meeting Wednesday night: it meant playing Parcheesi instead of Pinochle, and saying things like "Judas Priest and Holy Toledo" when you clearly meant something else.

As a fledgling Presbyterian, growing up between that, I knew only that my own church did not have much by way of prescribed religious behavior. Only later did I learn that Reformed theology, with its sensitivity to human sin, and its openness to the insights of depth psychology, knows a bit about human complexity: that human motives are rarely simple: that religious pride is not uncommon and that there is a closeness between passionate religious conviction and intolerance.

We are, in America, a religiously pluralistic society. My neighborhood was a microcosm. Built into the foundations of this country is a studied neutrality about sectarian religion. It is one of the lasting geniuses of our experiment. And yet, over the years, we continue to value public piety. de Tocqueville was the first outsider to note the deep religiosity of the American people. Visitors from nations that have established religions, express surprise at the universal practice of public piety here. We pray publically at the drop of a hat: for banquets, meetings, the opening of Congress, conventions, and football games. - Rodeo in Dallas - argue about public symbols

Because of that, the corruption of public piety has been a topic of consistent fascination with us. John Updike in A Month of Sundays and Frederick Buechner in a series of novels, tackle the question. Sinclair Lewis loathed dishonest piety and wrote about a clergyman named Elmer Gantry. Even John MacDonald's penchant for lively suspense turned up a novel about the religious empire of a suspiciously familiar sounding Florida television evangelist. The classic, however, is Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory. An alcoholic priest, itinerating through the villages of Southern Mexico ends up in a bar, drinking up the money he has made baptizing babies. Greene wrote, trenchantly, "It was appalling how easily one forgot and went back...The brandy was musty on the tongue with his own corruption. God might forgive cowardice and passion, but was it possible to forgive the habit of piety?" (p. 227-228)

our anger at Bakker New York

It is one of the functions of religion to define religious behavior. The religion of Jesus had an elaborate system for the purpose, and it was a good one from which we can still learn much. As is the case with all religious systems, it could be corrupted - and was. But Judaism, in the first century at least, knew what religious behavior looked like when it saw it.

It was, first, almsgiving... the money a religious person gave, mainly for the support of the poor. Alms were in addition to the tithe, the return of one tenth of everything a person had: to the Lord. Trumpets sometimes were sounded in the streets for special festival occasions. The allusion Jesus made in our text this morning suggests that if one was creative, one could manage to do one's alms giving at the right time, when the trumpets were blowing, for instance. A substantial contributor could approach the Synagogue with a bulging purse and with good timing be rewarded with the admiring attention of everyone else who was there. Now there is a dimension to this that can allude us. Eastern culture openly approved the straight forward seeking of public admiration. It's not a bad idea, actually. If the culture values generosity, for instance, which Jesus' culture did, then a system which rewards generosity with public admiration is a sensible device. In this context, then, what Jesus said about almsgiving in private, not letting the right hand know what the left is doing, is rather radical. It is also consistent with the best and highest teaching of the Rabbis. He was criticizing the corruption of the system - not the system itself.

Judaism knew that religious behavior included prayer. The devout stopped three times during the day, turned in the direction of Jerusalem, and prayed. There is great and profound wisdom in the discipline of Jewish mysticism. We have much to learn from what our spiritual ancestors knew about spirituality but none of it adapts well to the public arena, Broad and High at rush hour, for instance. That is the allusion, in the text. Again, with a bit of forethought, one could arrange to be in the marketplace at the designated hour for prayer and could be rewarded, again, with the approval and admiration of other people.

Religion also meant fasting...and in my more whimsical moments I ponder God's amusement at our obsessive weight watching, and the fact that the only thing that works is a regimen with all the characteristics of a religious discipline. I can imagine God enjoying the fact that American affluence and the fast food industry have taught us something we failed to learn from three thousand years of religious restricting and that is if you want to loose weight you must fast with the discipline of a religious zealot. In any event, the devout fasted. Everybody was supposed to fast on the day of Atonement. But the zealous, in Jesus' day, fasted twice a week, in addition - Monday and Thursday. It was customary to announce that one was fasting by rubbing ashes on one's cheeks, or by wearing shabby clothes, or by frowning a lot - which isn't hard to do if you haven't had anything to eat all day. In the text this morning Jesus takes his disciples far beyond the boundries of religious law and custom and suggests that they should annoint their faces when they fast, which is what you do to convey joy and festivity...and here, I believe, we begin to see the depth and importance of Jesus' emphasis. Religious behavior, by his lights, is the way a person responds to the goodness and mercy of God. If you said "I love you" to someone on Valentine's Day, and meant it, you didn't do it very publically. On the contrary, it was a private and personal gesture, and its reward was in the very act of expressing it. When you love someone, it is a good thing to express that love. And so Jesus taught that the purpose of religious behavior is to say "I love you" to God, and if it is done so as to earn the admiration of any public, it will be less than an honest expression of love for God. Its reward will come from the applause of the gallery.

The trouble with public piety in Jesus' day, and in our own, is that it can become a substitute for the far more difficult task private piety - praying in your closet, rewarded by no applause, perhaps not even being answered, and public faithfulness which is not often popular and can get a person crucified. Thus, Jesus reserved his most scathing criticism for those people for whom public displays of religion became a substitute for authentic living in covenant with the God of love and justice. That was always the genius of Judaism. The prophets consistently called God's people to account for substituting religious ritual for justice, which is the religion . God wants. Jesus did not condemn structured religion: in fact, clearly, he practiced it. He prayed, gave alms, and fasted on assigned days along with his people. What he condemned was the popular practice of substituting the private discipline for public faithfulness.

Christianity is not simply a new and better piety. In fact, built into the fabric of the Gospel is a tension: a paradox - between our Lord's insistance that discipleship happens in the world, and therefore very visibly, and his warning that when the visibility becomes the point, we have ceased to please God. In the Sermon on the Mount Matthew reports that he said, "Beware of practicing your piety in order to be seen," and, "let your light so shine that people will see your good works.

Christianity is not a new and better piety: and yet Jesus would not understand a religion with no demand. There is a hunger - a famine for spirituality in our culture today. High demand churches are meeting a real need and the continuing appeal of the new evangelical churches is that it

costs something to belong, while mainline Protestants continue to dispense what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. You can, in fact, belong to most churches with far less effort, discipline, or expense than you can belong to any service club, or fraternal organization in society. The remedy, in our tradition, is not the superimposition of a new religious discipline. The Presbyterian preference is for self-imposed religious discipline born of love for God. It is born of our experience that when people commit themselves voluntarily to a discipline: to Bible reading, Bible study, prayer, worship - their spirits do deepen, and faith is strengthened. That, by the way, is what Lent is for - and I commend to each one a covenant of Lenten discipline consisting of the Bible study program, worship every Sunday, and new and brave commitment to give sacrificially - without being prodded.

The uniqueness of Jesus was that he taught a religion that must be both private and public. It is the combination which is specifically Christian: the counterpoint of prayer and action; private almsgiving and political responsibility. I sincerely believe the moral majority has it wrong. Prayer in the public schools is not the point. The values of Jesus - who loved children and gave them life and wholeness, have far more to do with the quality of education those children receive in the classrooms; and the willingness of the community to be responsible for that quality; and beyond the classroom to the social services, the health care, and day care, and aid to dependant children which a community decides to afford - or not to afford - its children...When Jesus Christ is Lord those are the things that matter - and saying a prayer in the classroom looks a lot like a smokescreen.

When public piety gets in the way of faithfulness and responsibility and strong love for the world God loves, it trivializes the whole enterprise. And, according to Jesus, it becomes an end in itself - its own reward.

That's the shame. Because the point is God's love. God loves us. God has loved the creation into being. God has loved it into wholeness and peace in Jesus the Christ. God wants his great love for you to get through. And as C. S. Lewis once observed, "He can't give it to you if you're too busy elevating yourself with your own piety." (Mere Christianty, p. 94)

The subject of the whole enterprise is the love of God. The bearer of that love - its incarnation, Jesus, taught a new way of being religious. In Jesus' religion, piety is essentially private and faithfulness is public. He promised that God is pleased with it: that when it is lived by men and women. God rewards it: that to live it is to know a new life of integrity and wholeness and peace and joy...that, in fact, when you and I have the disciplined courage to live it - a bit of God's kingdom begins to live in us...

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strengh to our God for ever and ever. Amen.